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DISTANT SHORES: A HISTORIOGRAPHIC VIEW ON TRANS-SAHARAN SPACE*

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Abstract

This article addresses how scholarship has formulated human connections and ruptures over the Sahara. However, these formulations were, and still are, based in both physical and discursive realities that have been developed in Africa itself. The idea of a dividing Sahara is based on historical political divisions – despite a homogenous political culture in the region – and by locally developed notions of race and religion, brought about by trade and justified in Islamic religious discourse. The Saharan divide acquired a new reading in colonial historiography, which, in turn, informed scholarly work until well into the 1960s. I will suggest that both colonial and postcolonial research on the differences and connections between the Saharan shores are suffering from a civilisational bias towards North Africa.

Key Words

Sahara, North Africa, West Africa, historiography, colonialism, racism.

The division between North Africa and the lands to the south of the Sahara Desert is both an intellectual construction and a physical reality. The desert is indeed a large inhospitable area separating two 'shores': the northern and southern Sahel. While today we use the term 'Sahel' to refer to the lands to the south of the Sahara, it was originally used to indicate the Sahara's northerly shore in Tunisia and the West Sahara as well. These distant shores have never been isolated and the Saharan barrier has never been insurmountable. The 'islands' in the Sahara – the central mountain ranges and the large oasis valleys – provide harsh but sustainable living spaces, some continuously inhabited from neolithic times. Geography does not connect or divide in itself; it is the people who do the dividing and connecting. Ideas about the differences and communalities between 'self' and 'other' across geographical space will certainly be reflected in historiography. This is as true for the Sahara as it is for other places and, like those other places, the Sahara has been experienced and described both as a dividing barrier and as a space of interaction and connection. Below I would like to sketch how scholarship, especially colonial scholarship, has helped to formulate social, cultural, and political connections and fissures over the Sahara. However, these formulations were, and still are, based in social,

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political, and cultural physical and discursive realities that have historically shaped Africa itself.[1] It is striking, though, that connective histories over the Sahara focus especially on aspects of trade, while so many political, social, and cultural history remains within the paradigm of the Saharan divide, despite an understanding of the connective qualities of Islam as a world religion. The idea of the Saharan historical divide is primarily informed by the borders of historical polities – despite a homogenous political culture in the region – and by locally developed notions of race, brought about by trade and justified in Islamic religious discourse. These divisive traits acquired a new reading in colonial historiography, which, in turn, kept informing scholarly work until at least well into the 1960s. To some extent, we are still confronted with this legacy in our thinking about the Sahara today.

The historiography of North Africa is as old as hieroglyphs. The same cannot be said for the historiography of the Sahel zone, but it dates back to at least the tenth century CE. Ghislaine Lydon provides an extensive overview of the early Arabic literature and its influence on the discursive disconnection of North Africa from the lands beyond the Sahara in her contribution to this Forum. In turn, the European orientalist study of the Sahara and its connections to the lands at both its shores started in the 1840s with the works of William Desborough Cooley and Johann Eduard Wappäus and the publications of early explorers of the region like Heinrich Barth; took off with a flourish of translations of North African and Sahelian Arabic texts in the late nineteenth century; became neglected and disregarded again in the early twentieth century; to finally resurge at the end of the colonial period.[2]

Despite earlier works, for the contemporary discipline of African history the foundational work on the history of trans-Saharan relations is without doubt Edward William Bovill's *The Golden Trade of the Moors*, published in 1958.[3] Bovill focuses his study on two domains: trade and politics. His work shows that the intimate trade relations between the two shores of the Sahara were old and uninterrupted. His description of trans-Saharan political relations shows the contrary: attempts at forcing political unities over the Sahara through violent conflict, even if successful, have never been long-lived, and have been followed by periods of political disinterest. Despite being widely read and cited, the book failed to become paradigmatic in two important ways. First of all, Bovill's example of studying trans-Saharan relations over the largest possible range of time was not emulated. While Bovill describes the importance and substance of trans-Saharan relations in the Axial Age and the Roman and Byzantine periods, later historians would focus on the period after the Arab invasion of North Africa. Second, Bovill's main argument – that the influence of sub-Saharan Africa on North Africa and the lands beyond the Mediterranean is as great as *vice versa* – was never picked up. This is due to what could be called the civilisational bias.

1 For reasons of space and expertise, I will focus here on orientalist studies, history, anthropology, and archaeology, largely leaving aside geography and linguistics, despite their relevance. The latter discipline, especially, played a significant role in the construction of an Africa divided over the Sahara between 'Hamito-Semitic'-speaking North Africans and 'Sudanic'-speaking inhabitants of the Sahel. Seminal for this historical and, therefore, here significant linguistic classification is D. Westermann, *Die Sudansprachen: eine sprachvergleichende Studie* (Hamburg, 1911).

2 S. Dulucq, *Ecrire l'histoire de l'Afrique à l'époque coloniale (XIXe – XXe siècles)* (Paris, 2009).

3 E. W. Bovill, *The Golden Trade of the Moors* (Princeton, 1995 [orig. pub. Oxford, 1958]).

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This bias finds its origin in the genealogy of Mediterranean civilisations constructed in the nineteenth century on the basis of archaeological and linguistic studies, which allowed Europeans to first appropriate the classical Greco-Roman civilisation as theirs, and then to categorise all expressions of these classical civilisations as 'European', denying the possibility of mutual influences within this civilisational space.[4] Although this genealogy is now formally discarded (it is now for instance accepted that the *foggara* watering system was introduced to the Roman Empire by Saharan Africans, not *vice versa*), the idea still remains that it is the technically, politically, or otherwise 'more advanced' society that initiates or attracts contact with 'less advanced' cultures, and is dominant in terms of influence: the 'advanced society' should therefore be the focus of study.[5] This, again, excludes theories of mutual influence.

Thus, the common hypothesis is that trans-Saharan connections depended on both the introduction of the camel (around two thousand years ago), and on the introduction of Islam as a world religion of commerce (about a thousand years later) in order to create a social cultural space across the desert. Both assumptions are based on a lack of sources and research on other possibilities, but not on conclusive evidence of the absence of trans-Saharan connections in different times and configurations.

RELIGION, CULTURE, AND THE CIVILISATIONAL BIAS

Apart from the well-studied riverain cultures along the Nile, one inroad into trans-Saharan connections in pre-Islamic times is the study of the Garamantes, a society that inhabited the present-day Libyan Fezzan in Roman times, connecting the North African coast to the sub-Saharan shores. But for a number of reasons, the Garamantes have largely remained the concern of archaeologists and classicists, rather than Africanists. First, there are hardly any written records, even for their interaction with the Roman Empire, making them the domain of archaeologists, and although the interactions between archaeology and history are abundant for the classical world – including North Africa – the interdisciplinary interactions for areas south of the Sahara still remain shallow. Second, archaeological research on the Sahara and Sahel in the classical period has been held back because there is still abundant work in exploring the internal local histories of the North African coastal areas, which is both easier and more rewarding to do (in terms of findings), and generally seen (in Europe) as of greater relevance. Third, the combined civilisational biases (old and new) play their part. The ever-present Eurocentric bias in the study of the classical period means that Roman (and subsequently Byzantine) North Africa are largely studied in their connections with Europe, neglecting the trans-Saharan connections. This leaves few resources for archaeological research south of the Sahara. As an example of the civilisational bias, the findings from the famous tomb at Abalessa, ascribed to queen Tin Hinan, were long interpreted as necessarily Roman in origin, though this has been

4 R. Strootman, 'Op zoek naar de klassieke wereld in Afrika en Afghanistan', *Hermeneus*, 85 (2013), 56–91.

5 A similar argument from a different angle and in a different place and time is made by J. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed* (New Haven, 2009). On the spread of *foggara*, see W. Vanacker, 'Blood, power, and profit' (unpublished PhD thesis, Gent University, 2013), 304.

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shown not to be the case.[6] Lastly, Saharan and Sahelian archaeological research is hampered by the hardships of the terrain, the logistics of the excavations, and the costs of certain types of analyses. Despite these barriers, a number of recent archaeological research projects in the Sahel have discovered material evidence of trans-Saharan interaction in the classical period and this material is finding its way into historical studies.[7] This is perhaps one of the most exciting developments in trans-Saharan history at the moment.

The hypothesis that Islam as a world religion with a written culture facilitated trade across the Sahara is, in principle, equally valid for Christianity and Judaism. Both religions have a long history in North Africa as well as in the Sahara. Common linguistic evidence shows that Saharan communities have enough of their cultural origins in Christian North Africa through trade contacts or migrations, to have adopted particular religious and social economic notions from that world. In Tamasheq, the language of the Tuareg people, the words for god (*massinagh*), angel (*anjelus*), and market town (*agherem*), to name only a few, are still of clearly recognisable Latin origin. That these words have not been replaced with Arabic loan words suggests a prolonged intensive commercial and religious contact with Christian North Africa.[8] There is some research on the Jewish trade networks in the Sahara that long existed alongside, and in partnership with, Muslim trade networks, but which could well predate the latter by centuries.[9] So far, little research has been carried out on possibly surviving sources within the Jewish communities of North Africa on the existence of trans-Saharan Jewish trading houses.

In any case, most studies take the advent of Islam as their point of departure. One reason is that there are simply more (and more translated) sources available for this period. However, I suspect that the civilisational bias plays its part as well. By and large, sub-Saharan civilisations are seen as receiving developments from the north. A recent contribution to the debate on the Saharan divide still approvingly quotes Ali Mazrui's old observation: 'The relationship between Arabs and Black Africans has always

6 D. Grébenart, 'Le tombeau d'Abalessa (Hoggar, Algérie)', *Antiquités Africaines*, 30 (1994), 261–70; M. Hachid, 'Du nouveau sur le monument d'Abalessa (Ahaggar, Algérie): de la date de l'introduction du dromadaire au Sahara central, du personnage d'Abalessa et des inscriptions rupestres dites "Libyco-Berbères"', *Sahara*, 17 (2006), 95–120.

7 W. Broekaert and W. Vanacker, 'Raiders to traders: economics of integration among nomadic communities in northern Africa', in Michael Peachin et al. (eds.), *Rome Beyond the Frontiers: Proceedings of the XIth Impact of Empire Workshop* (New York, 2013). A number of large archaeological research projects on Garamantean society have been carried out at Leicester University's School of Archaeology and Ancient History. The latest of these projects expanded to the trans-Saharan connections of Garamantean society: Trans-SAHARA, (http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/archaeology/research/projects/the-trans-sahara-project), accessed 3 Feb. 2014.

8 Although it is true that the word *suq*, Arabic for market, is well known in Saharan contexts, the main term for market or town remains *agherem*, from Latin *agora*, in most Tamasheq dialects.

9 Although there is an abundance of studies on the Jewish communities of the Maghreb, so far the only work on the history of a Jewish community *in* the Sahara is J. Hunwick, *Jews of a Saharan Oasis: The Elimination of the Tamentit Community* (Princeton, 2006). Recently, a number of historians have picked up on the Jewish trans-Saharan diaspora. See G. Lydon, *On Trans-Saharan Trails* (Cambridge, 2009); E. Ross, 'A historical geography of the trans-Saharan trade', in G. Krätli and G. Lydon (eds.), *The Trans-Saharan Book Trade* (Leiden, 2011), 1–34; R. Aouad, 'De Tombouctou à Conakry: musulmans et juifs du Maroc dans l'espace de la relation Maroc-Afrique noire (fin XIXe siècle – début XXe siècle)', in F. Abécassis and K. Dirèche-Slimani (eds.), *La bienvenue et l'adieu: migrants juifs et musulmans au Maghreb, XVe–XXe siècles* (Paris, 2012).

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been asymmetrical – with the Middle East usually the giver, and Black Africa usually the receiver.'[10]

A last reason I suspect for this focus of study on the Islamic period is the impact of African political independence. From that moment until only recently, African history has been enlisted in the service of national identity in most North African states; the history of some states in the Sahel (Mauritania and Sudan) has similarly been largely constructed as Arabic and Muslim. Most scholarly interest in the Garamantes within North Africa itself comes from the side of North African scholars with an interest in the position of Berber identity and culture in North African societies. The best and most recent example is Dida Badi ag Khammadine's excellent study of the Tassili n Ajjer mountains and their inhabitants, which attempts to establish the historical continuities from the classical period until the present.[11]

Religion has been described as both a divisive and a connecting factor in the history of relations between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. Islam spread mostly peacefully by way of trans-Saharan commerce and was adopted for commercial and political reasons first by the inhabitants of the Sahel, who spread it slowly southwards to the West African coast by way of commerce, or by state formation and *jihad*. This old and well-established vision of Islam as a peaceful connector can be found in the foundational works by Bovill, Roland Oliver and John Fage and, especially, Harry Norris.[12]

ISLAM, RACE, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SELF AND OTHER ACROSS THE SAHARA

While trade, secured in a shared use of Islamic law, connected the Sahel to North Africa economically, that same economy generated social and racial divides as a result of the slave trade. Just as in Europe, and more or less at the same time, the slave trade with sub-Saharan Africa became justified in a racial discourse, legitimated through the Abrahamic tradition of the story of Noah and his son Ham.[13] Discourses on heterodox Islamic praxis in the Sahara, where Khariji Islam still exists to the present, and south of the Sahara, where syncretic practices were common, added to this legitimation by expanding the idea of an 'impure' Muslim praxis, which made Africans into heretics or idolaters who could legally be enslaved. The North African scholar Ibn Khaldûn was one of the first to theorise the sub-Saharan African racial 'other' in his *Muqaddimah*, discussing both the curse of Ham and classical Greek theories on climate as explaining factors for African black physiognomy and

10 A. Mazrui, 'Black Africa and the Arabs', *Foreign Affairs*, 54 (1975), 725 quoted in A. Akinsaya, 'Afro-Arab cooperation and North Africa', in H. Hassan (ed.), *Regional Integration in Africa: Bridging the North-Sub-Saharan Divide* (Pretoria, 2011), 58–102, quoted in 61.

11 D. B. ag Khammedine, *Les Touaregs du Tassili n Ajjer: mémoire collective et organisation sociale* (Algiers, 2012).

12 E. W. Bovill, *The Golden Trade of the Moors* (Oxford, 1958); R. Oliver and J. Fage, *A Short History of Africa* (Harmondsworth, 1962); H. T. Norris, *The Tuaregs: Their Islamic Legacy and its Diffusion in the Sahel* (Warminster, 1975).

13 C. El Hamel, *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race and Islam* (Cambridge, 2013), 58. It is likely that Europeans not only found inspiration in North Africa for the organisation of their Caribbean sugar plantations, but also for the racial justification of its slave labour.

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the inferiority ascribed to them.[14] Of course, Ibn Khaldûn's discussion of classical Greek theories explaining racial difference out of climatic conditions is a reminder that racial conceptualisations of Africans, and even by Africans, largely predate Islam, but ancient notions of race in Africa are an issue only recently explored.[15] Discussions of the Islamic heterodoxy of *sudani* – black Africans – became especially important in the Maghreb from the sixteenth century onwards, when the famous Timbuktu scholar Ahmad Baba was asked his opinion on the legal validity of enslaving black Africans, who were clearly not seen as good Muslims.[16] The tendency to equate black Africans with slaves and therefore with infidels, or inferior Muslims at best, became legally formalised with the creation of Sultan Moulay Ismael's slave army in 1705.[17] This army conscripted all slaves in the Sultanate; as all blacks were seen as by definition slaves, they became perforce conscripted. These historical racial constructions still influence relations between North and sub-Saharan Africa, and within North African and Saharan societies.

The number of studies of the history of the slave trade, internal slavery in North Africa and the Sahel, and especially of its justification through a racial discourse, is negligible compared to the works written on these subjects in the context of the Atlantic world. For the eastern Sahel the conflict in the Republic of Sudan between north and south, which revived slave trade and racial discourses, led to a number of historical studies on the legacy of slavery and its racial construction, notably by Amir Idris, Jok Madut Jok, Sharon Hutchinson, Heather Sharkey, and Ahmad Alawad Sikainga.[18] For North Africa and the western parts of the Sahara and Sahel, the historical study of slavery or its racial dimensions only took off in the last decade, but it has since flourished.[19]

I think the neglect of this topic until recently has three main reasons. The first is the contention that slavery was formally 'colour blind' in the Muslim World. 'White' European slaves – Circassians, northern Europeans, as well as American sailors – were traded alongside 'black' Africans in North Africa until well into the nineteenth century.[20] Second, the

14 ibn Khaldûn, al-Hadrami, *The Muqaddimah, an Introduction to History*, trans. F. Rosenthal, abridged and ed. N. J. Dawood (2nd edn, Princeton, 2005), 58–63.

15 C. Fluehr-Lobban and K. Rhodes (eds.), *Race and Identity in the Nile Valley: Ancient and Modern Perspectives* (Trenton, NJ, 2004).

16 M. Zouber, *Ahmad Baba de Tombouctou (1556–1627): sa vie et son oeuvre* (Paris, 1977).

17 C. El Hamel, '"Race", slavery, and Islam in Maghribi Mediterranean thought: the question of the *Haratin* in Morocco', *Journal of North African Studies*, 7 (2002), 29–52.

18 S. Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas: Coping with Money, War, and the State* (Berkeley, CA, 1996); A. Idris, *Sudan's Civil War: Slavery, Race, and Informational Identities* (Lewiston, ME, 2001): J. Madut Jok, *War and Slavery in Sudan* (Philadelphia, 2001); H. Sharkey, 'Arab identity and ideology in Sudan: the politics of language, ethnicity, and race', *African Affairs*, 107:426 (2008), 21–43; A. A. Sikainga, *Slaves into Workers: Emancipation and Labor in Colonial Sudan* (Austin, 1996).

19 L. Brock, 'The Tamejirt: kinship and social history in a Tuareg community' (unpublished PhD thesis, Columbia University, 1984); A. Bouman, 'Benefits of belonging: dynamics of Iklan identity, Burkina Faso' (unpubished PhD thesis, University of Utrecht, 2003); C. El Hamel, *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam* (Cambridge, 2013); B. Hall, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa 1600–1960* (Cambridge, 2011); B. Lecocq, *Disputed Desert: Decolonisation, Competing Nationalisms and Tuareg Rebellions in Northern Mali* (Leiden, 2010); B. Rossi (ed.), *Reconfiguring Slavery: West African Trajectories* (Chicago, 2009).

20 R. Davis, *Christian Slaves, Muslim Masters: White Slavery in the Mediterranean, the Barbary Coast and Italy, 1500–1800* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). Davis's controversial argument is interesting not so

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idea that black Africans were better off as slaves in Muslim societies than at home in their 'barbarous lands' developed in nineteenth-century European scholarship as part of a larger colonial racial discourse on the hierarchical evolutionary nature of civilisations (the foundation of the civilisational bias discussed above). Consider, for example, the following concluding remarks in a treatise on Muslim slave trade in Africa by the famous nineteenth-century Dutch orientalist Christiaan Snouck-Hurgronje in his seminal work *Mekka*:

> The thousands of negroes and Abyssinians who have been carried off into Moslim [*sic*] lands and there remember their earlier life consider themselves as made into men by slavery: all are contented, and not one wishes to return to his native land.[21]

Although the racial character of this discourse was later abandoned, the concept of benign slavery stuck until quite recently.[22] The third reason for the neglect of racism as a factor in the relations between North and sub-Saharan Africa, has been the reluctance among Western scholars to engage with the notion that African peoples, who had for so long been racialised and associated with each other as racially inferior in the West, could in fact entertain similar notions towards each other.

RELATED POLITICAL CULTURES AND DIVIDED POLITICAL REALMS

Racial and religious divisions do not *per se* preclude political unity across the Sahara. The most important manifestation of this political unity has been a common culture of political organisation, which the inhabitants of the Sahara – both nomads and oasis dwellers – share with the inhabitants of North Africa and the Middle East. In fact, from Mauritania and Morocco in the west, through the Sahara, across the Red Sea, continuing through the South and Central Asian steppes, the main political unit was (and is) the tribe. These tribes, as authors from Ibn Khaldûn onwards teach us, create and recreate political federations and alliances, which are always flexible and changing, but always opposed to other tribal alliances. The study of tribal history in North Africa and the Sahara remains a fruitful subject.[23] It is probably this homogenous political culture that precluded a territorial political unity over the Sahara, as it still precludes this unity today. Of course, various attempts have been made, beginning with the Almoravids' unification of a territory stretching from the river Senegal northwards to Andalusia in the eleventh century; via Sultan Ahmad al-Mansur's famous 'conquest' of the Songhay Empire in the late sixteenth century; and perhaps one day ending with the UN-organised referendum on the political future of

much because of the one million figure he puts on the amount of 'white' slaves shipped to the Barbary Coast, but precisely because he unproblematically frames them as 'white' in a historical context where this racial connotation is not in all respects appropriate.

21 C. Snouck-Hurgronje, *Mekka in the Latter Part of the 19th Century*, trans. J. H. Monahan, introduction J. J. Witkam (Leiden, 2007), 24.

22 J. Hunwick and E. Troutt Powell, *The African Diaspora in the Mediterranean Lands of Islam* (Princeton, 2002).

23 From Ibn Khaldûn and Baron Mac Guckin de Slane, *Histoire des berbères et des dynasties musulmanes de l'Afrique septentrionale; traduit de l'Arabe par le baron de Slane* (Paris, 1978); all the way to P. Bonte and H. ben Yazid (eds.), *La tribu à l'heure de la globalisation* (Paris, 2009).

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Western Sahara. The difficulties in ruling the Sahara have been known to Africans for a long time. In the historiography of Morocco, the difference between the *Bilâd al-Makhzen* – the realm of governance – and the *Bilâd as-Sibâ'* – the anarchic mountain and desert edges of the realm – is of great importance. The idea of this divide thus comes from Maghrebi historiography itself, which in turn reflected the perceived political realities of the area, although some authors warn us that the distinction should not be overstressed and that the term *Sibâ'* – anarchy – seems partly extraneous to the local political language.[24] Further east, the triangular conflicts between Sudan, Libya, and Chad over parts of the eastern Sahel and Sahara (notably the Aouzou strip, a disputed stretch of Sahara that came into being through the differences in border delineations in various Franco-Italian treaties) from the 1970s, down to the war in Darfur in the 2000s, seem to be a colonial legacy. But here too, political divisions predate European colonialism and go back to Ottoman times. However, the history of the political relations between Ottoman North Africa and the eastern Sahara and Sahel remain largely unexplored, whether by Africanists or Ottomanists. The main works on this subject focus on the non-state actors in these relations, especially the Sanusiyya brotherhood, although a recent doctoral dissertation is dedicated to the official relations between Istanbul, Libya, and the Lake Chad area.[25] With few exceptions, studies on Saharan societies, old or recent, stress the political independence of these societies from any state power outside the Sahara.

COLONIAL ACADEMICS AND THE WIDENING OF THE SAHARAN DIVIDE

European colonial conquest brought new dimensions to the already existing perception of differences in race and Islamic praxis between North Africa, the Sahara, and sub-Saharan Africa. The French colonial administration in particular came to believe in fundamental differences between an 'Arab Islam' in North Africa and a 'Black Islam' in sub-Saharan Africa. This opposite pairing was complemented with a 'Saharan Islam' or 'Moorish Islam' that stood in between. 'Arab Islam' in North Africa was perceived to be orthodox, based in scripture, and legalistic and fanatic in nature as most effective armed resistance against colonial conquest in North Africa had been organised by Sufi brotherhoods. 'Black Islam' in sub-Saharan Africa was seen as syncretic, infused with magical praxis, more tolerant and less fanatic, despite the fact that West Africa had witnessed a series of *jihad*s in the nineteenth century, some initiated by branches of the same Sufi brotherhoods that organised resistance in North Africa. 'Saharan' or 'Moorish Islam' was seen as orthodox and scripture based, like 'Arab Islam', but not so fanatic and much influenced by the

24 E. Gellner, *Saints of the Atlas* (London, 1969); M. Ennaji and P. Pascon (eds.), *Le Makhzen et le Sous Al-Aqsa: la correspondance politique de la maison d'Illigh (1821–1894)* (Casablanca, 1988); A. Laroui, 'Morocco from the beginning of the nineteenth century to 1880', in J. F. Ade Ajayi (ed.), *Unesco General History of Africa, Volume VI: Africa in the Nineteenth Century until the 1880s* (Paris, 1989), 478–96; G. Marçais, *Les Arabes et les Berbères du XIe au XIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1913).

25 J.-L. Triaud, *La légende noire de la Sanûsiyya: une confrérie musulmane saharienne sous le regard français (1840–1930)* (Paris, 1995); M. Minawi, 'Lines in the sand: the Ottoman Empire's policies of expansion and consolidation along its African and Arabian frontiers (1882–1902)' (unpublished PhD thesis, New York University, 2012).

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magical piety of 'Black Islam'.[26] The idea of a difference between 'Black Islam' and 'Arab Islam', first expressed in the 1910s by colonial scholars like Paul Marty and Robert Randau, became strongly interwoven with the French *politique des races* discussed below.[27] The belief in the existence of a distinctively 'black' tolerant syncretic Sufi Islam remained a colonial political and scholarly doctrine until well in the 1960s. It is still strong today, obfuscating our understanding of the much less studied but always present orthodox scriptural Islam, which is nevertheless celebrated as African heritage.[28] The investments in recent decades by the South African state, the Ford Foundation, the Norwegian Government, and a number of private organisations, in the various manuscript collections in Timbuktu bear witness to this celebration. That these collections largely consist of *fatwa*s – Muslim legal rulings – and books on Islamic Malikite law, is then overlooked.[29]

European scholars only started to see North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa as politically disconnected in the colonial period. Precolonial European explorers and scholars like Heinrich Barth, Friedrich Gerhard Rohlfs, or Gustav Nachtigal still described these regions as politically coherent and connected. This observation was based on their own experiences as they travelled from Ottoman-ruled Libya to the Lake Chad region. Men like Barth and Rohlfs largely depended on African traders and their networks who guided their travels along trade roads through African polities, where local Muslim rulers passed them on through their political and economic relations, or blocked their passage on political grounds. Some of Barth's travels were even partly financed by loans from local rulers, while Rohlfs's later travels were sponsored by the Egyptian state. The Egyptian Khedive's financing of Rohlfs's expedition was a direct consequence of the nineteenth-century political unification of Egypt with the *Bilâd as-Sudân* through Egyptian colonisation.

26 B. Frede, 'Zwischen Kontinuität und Erneuerung: Saihani (Ahmad Mahmud B. Muhammad at-Tulba alias Mannabba, 1907–1986) und die Entwicklung der Tijaniyya in Mauretanien am Beispiel der faida-Bewegung von Ibrahim Niasse (1900–1975)' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Berlin, 2011), 164.

27 P. Marty, *Etudes sur l'islam et les tribus du Soudan I: Les Kounta de l'est; les Berabich; les Iguellad; II: La région de Tombouctou; Dienné, le Macina et dépendances; III: Les tribus maures du Sahel et du Hodh; IV: La région de Kayes; le pays bambara; le Sahel de Nioro* (Paris, 1919–21); R. Randau, *L'Islam et la politique musulmane française en Afrique occidentale française* (Paris, 1912).

28 The literature on 'African' Sufi brotherhoods, mostly studied outside their connections to wider branches of the same orders in North Africa or beyond, abound. Scriptural Islam in the Republic of Sudan has received wide attention for political reasons. The few studies on scriptural Islam in the francophone Sahel include L. Kaba, *The Wahhabiyya, Islamic Reform and Politics in French West Africa* (Evanston, IL, 1974); G. Nicolas, *Dynamique de l'islam au sud du Sahara* (Paris, 1981); R. Otayek, *Le radicalisme islamique au sud du Sahara* (Paris, 1993). None of these are historical studies however. The first historical work is probably C. Ahmed, *Jawâbu-l-Ifrîqî: The Response of the African: West African 'ulamâ' in Mecca and Medina 19th–20th centuries* (Leiden, 2014).

29 Despite fears for their destruction or sale by *Salafi-Jihadi* forces who occupied Timbuktu for most of 2012, the librarians and archivists of the Ahmad Baba Centre and other libraries in Timbuktu had the courage to hide or relocate most of the manuscript collections. An estimated 80 per cent at least has survived the Salafi destructions of 2012, but each lost manuscript is to be deplored. It is also deplorable that while so much international attention is given to the collections in Timbuktu, other collections throughout the Sahel are still largely neglected by the same funding agencies so keen on preservation of African heritage, despite their large interest and their sometimes dire state.

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These experiences shaped their idea that North Africa was connected to the rest of the continent by trade, religion, language, and politics.[30]

In the French tradition, where the study of sub-Saharan Africa partly grew under the aegis of classical orientalist scholarship, the study of North and West Africa remained connected until the end of the nineteenth century. A number of important scholars of sub-Saharan African history and ethnography started their careers as *orientalistes*, the most famous example being Maurice Delafosse who studied Arabic with his father-in-law Octave Houdas, who made the first translation of the *Tarîkh as-Sudân*.[31] However, from the early twentieth century onwards, the divisions between disciplines and geographical regions became strongly pronounced in European academic practice, and was reflected in the scholarly output on Africa.[32]

The colonial partition of Africa through the works of various scholarly disciplines, which partly reflected the colonial administrative carving-up of the region, remains an important heritage today. North Africa was considered an integral part of the Arab Muslim world and consequently became the domain of Arabists and Islamologists, with their philological traditions and fascinations for the Muslim past. Sub-Saharan Africa became the domain of ethnographers and anthropologists, and was gradually stripped of its historicity by the core practices of these disciplines.[33] Both the academic and administrative divides were then further solidified by geographers who followed these lines of thinking in the making of colonial maps. In the French domains, the line between scholar and administrator remained blurred throughout the colonial period. Early colonial historians and ethnographers like Octave Depont and Louis Massignon writing on Algeria, Charles Monteil and Maurice Delafosse writing on the French Sudan, or Xavier Coppolani and Paul Marty, who described Berber North African, Saharan, and Sahel societies, did so with the aim of governing them. All these men served in the colonial administration alongside their academic careers.

The ideas of these scholar/administrators and their colleagues informed the two main French colonial policies that made the Saharan divide a perceived and ultimately formal political reality: the *politique des races* developed in French West Africa under Governor William Ponty, and the *politique berbère* developed under Marshall Resident General Hubert Lyautey in Morocco. The essence of both policies was one of divide and rule. In North Africa, Berbers and Arabs were constructed as entirely different races with entirely different qualities through linguistic and anthropological studies.[34] The academic foundations of the *politique berbère* were laid by Paul Marty, who would later write substantive ethnographies of the populations of the Sahara and the Sahel. The *politique berbère* was

30 H. Barth, *Reisen und Entdeckungen in Nord- und Zentralafrika in den Jahren 1849 bis 1855* (Gotha, 1857–8); F. G. Rohlfs, *Expedition zur Erforschung der Libyschen Wüste unter des Auspizien Sr. H. d. Chedive von Ägypten im Winter 1874/1875 ausgeführt* (Cassel, 1883).

31 Es-Sa'di and O. Houdas, *Tarikh Es-Soudan par Abderrahman Ben Abdallah Ben 'Imran Ben 'Amir Es-Sa'di, traduit de l'Arabe par O. Houdas* (Paris, 1964).

32 S. Dulucq, *Ecrire l'histoire de l'Afrique à l'époque coloniale (XIXe–XXe siècles)* (Paris, 2009), 35–8.

33 J. Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology makes its Object* (New York, 1983).

34 K. Haoui, 'Classifications linguistiques et anthropologiques de la Société d'anthropologie de Paris au XIXe siècle', *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 33 (1993), 51–72.

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ultimately adopted in Mauritania and Algeria as well, where it was further developed by Louis Massignon and his pupils.[35] In West Africa, the *politique des races* made the ethnic homogenisation of all societies an instrument of colonial domination. Both policies were developed in the 1910s, almost simultaneously and in relation to each other. The politics of divide and conquer solidified already existing notions of otherness held by African populations toward each other, strengthening the political divisions across the Sahara, or so the current consensus has it. How exactly this process unfolded is still unclear. To date we still wait for a solid study of the relations between these two policies with closely linked aims and impacts, that developed a coherent body of colonial thought on Islam, the Arabic language, and 'indigenous African cultures', including 'Berber culture'.[36]

In the high colonial period, administrators received excellent training in these policies and the colonial scholarly disciplines, supported by institutes such as the *Centre des Hautes Etudes d'Administration Musulmane* and *l'Ecole d'Administration Coloniale*. Many with a deeper fascination for the region they governed put these studies to good use in scientific work. The most famous example is probably Yves Person, whose *Samori* remains the solid basis for much study on Guinée.[37] Less well known but perhaps even more important is the *orientaliste* Vincent Monteil, who was a direct student of Louis Massignon, one of the principal scholars developing the *politique berbère* in Algeria.[38] Monteil himself spent most of his early career as a military administrator and diplomat in Algeria and the Middle East, while continuing to publish scholarly works on Islam. In the 1960s, however, Monteil directed the Institut Français d'Afrique Noire in Dakar, where he wrote his famous *l'Islam noire*, in which he expounded the ideas of an African Islam, different from an Arab Islam, which his teacher Massignon had taught him decades before.[39] Less well known than Monteil's work, but at the time perhaps even more influential in continuing the *Islam noire* trope, was that of Monteil's colleague in the colonial military Marcel Cardaire, the first patron of later United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) director, historian, and novelist Amadou Hampaté Bâ. Although Cardaire's *Islam et le terroir africain* is rather obscure, his collaborations with Bâ on the teachings of Tierno Bokar, the sage of Bandiagara, are now world-famous and itself the object of Africanist study.[40]

After independence, many of these well-trained colonial administrator/scholars sought academic careers. Monteil taught Islam at the University Paris Diderot. Yves Person joined the Sorbonne as professor of African history. Roland Colin, who started his career as administrator in French Sudan, became professor of development anthropology in

35 Ch.-R. Ageron, *Les Algériens musulmans et la France* (1871–1919) (Paris, 1968); Ch.-R. Ageron, 'La politique berbère du protectorat marocain de 1913 à 1934', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 18 (1971), 50–90. General Gallieni had previously developed a similar *politique des races* on Madagascar.

36 Efforts in this direction have been made by E. ould Mahomed Baba, 'La discrimination Arabes/Berbères aurait-elle partiellement inspiré la politique coloniale en Mauritanie?', *MASADIR: Cahiers des Sources de l'Histoire de la Mauritanie*, 3 (2002), 101–7.

37 Y. Person, *Samori* (Dakar, 1968).

38 C. Destremau and J. Moncelon, *Louis Massignon, le 'cheikh admirable'* (Paris, 1994), 286–93.

39 V. Monteil, *L'Islam Noir* (Paris, 1964).

40 M. Cardaire, *Islam et le terroir Africain* (Bamako, 1954); A. H. Bâ and M. Cardaire, *Tierno Bokar; le sage de Bandiagara* (Paris, 1957).

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Bordeaux.[41] Jean Chapelle, who served as colonial officer in the Chadian Borkou Ennedi Tibesti in the 1950s, and then stayed on as administrator in independent Chad, wrote a seminal study of the Tubu that is yet to be rivalled.[42] Of course, these former colonial administrators brought the logic of colonial scholarship and administration along in their further career paths, with a lasting impact.[43] This influence was even stronger in the former colonial research and educational centres that continued to exist in France. In 1960, the *Centre des Hautes Etudes pour l'Administration Musulmane* was renamed *Centre des Hautes Etudes sur l'Afrique et l'Asie Moderne*. This institute offered university-level courses until the 1990s, and was dissolved only in 2000. When the present author took classes there in 1994, the classroom wall was still decorated with a map of the French Empire dating from the 1950s.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN BRIEF

Since colonial times, research on the Sahara has made impressive strides toward a more integrative history, reconnecting the southern and northern shores. In recent years, the Sahara has gained new attention as a gateway between Africa and Europe. With the rejuvenation of trans-Saharan trade roads – which now bring various drugs and African and Asian migrants to the Mediterranean shores of Europe, and foodstuffs, electronics, cars, and weapons to the Sahel – social, geographical, and anthropological studies on the Sahara have likewise seen an upsurge.[44] A number of edited volumes have come out in recent years combining historical, anthropological, and social geographical studies on trans-Saharan space, stressing the connections and encounters.[45] Yet, although the latter contain a number of historical contributions, historians seem still a bit behind. Apart from the genuine academic interest researchers have in these subjects, the growth in the number of these studies is partly the result of the research-funding climate in Europe which encourages 'socially relevant' studies, while being less interested in fundamental research set in the remote past. A more important, and more hopeful development is the flourishing of Saharan studies in Africa itself, with the creation of a number of new research centres and the boosting of older ones, as described by Lydon in this Forum.

Political developments in North Africa, the Sahara, and the Sahel in recent decades including the rise of militant Salafi Islam in Egypt and Algeria and now the Sahel; the Tuareg rebellions in Mali and Niger; the wars and genocide in northern Chad and Darfur;

41 R. Colin, *Kènèdougou au crépuscule de l'Afrique coloniale: mémoires des années cinquante* (Paris, 2004).

42 J. Chapelle, *Nomades noirs du Sahara: les Toubous* (2nd edn, Paris, 1982).

43 Similar developments in the (former) British Empire are described in J. Hodge, *Triumph of the Expert: Agrarian Doctrines of Development and the Legacies of British Colonialism* (Athens, OH, 2007).

44 I. Kohl, *Beautiful Modern Tuareg: Border Crossing Tuareg between Niger, Algeria and Libya* (Berlin, 2009); J. Brachet, *Migrations transsahariennes: vers un désert cosmopolite et morcelé, Niger* (Bellecombe-en-Bauges, 2009); and especially J. Scheele, *Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara* (Cambridge, 2012).

45 L. Marfaing and S. Wippel (eds.), *Les rélations transsahariennes a l'époque contemporaine – un espace en constante mutation* (Paris, 2004); E. Grégoire and J. Schmitz (eds.), *Afrique noire et monde arabe: continuités et ruptures* (Bondy, 2000); E. Boesen and L. Marfaing (eds.), *Les nouveaux urbains dans l'espace Sahara-Sahel: un cosmopolitisme par le bas* (Paris, 2007); I. Kohl and A. Fischer (eds.), *Tuareg Society within a Globalized World: Saharan Life in Transition* (London, 2010).

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the Arab Spring, all point not so much to a recent globalisation, but to the continued political interconnectedness (if not territorial unity) of these regions.[46] This interconnectedness, shaped over the centuries through both a theory of politics based in Islam and a political praxis based in tribal alliances, will undoubtedly become a new field of study (if it hasn't already become one) fuelled by policy-oriented research funding programmes. And who among us could resist? All these future (and present) studies will need to take the deeply-connected histories of the whole region into account, which is not an easy task. The question is whether academic and geopolitical policymakers will understand the significance of these deep connections well enough to renew support for fundamental research, or whether academia instead will be forced further to furnish ever larger quantities of bibliometrically-significant quick fixes.

CONCLUSION

The Sahara is not called 'The Great Desert' for nothing. Countless camel caravan and car carcasses testify to the difficulties in crossing it. Yet, the Sahara has never been an impassable geophysical barrier. Trade over the Sahara has known its ups and downs, but after a century of relative decline in value, although perhaps not in volume, it has recently picked up again. Although some attempts have been made, the Almoravids being perhaps the most successful, no lasting political unity has ever been created over the Sahara. This is largely due to the homogenous political culture *in* the Sahara – a culture it shares with North Africa – that is based on tribal alliances and rivalries that respect and value political fragmentation. Although both trade and politics predate the advent of Islam in Africa, both have been profoundly shaped by the legal and political outlook of this religion. Islam has certainly helped to consolidate a cultural space, building on the existing praxis previously shaped by Judaism and Christianity. As there exists economic, political, and cultural unity over the Sahara in some way or another, the differences and divisions over the Sahara are perhaps more an intellectual creation than anything else.

As humans all over the planet have done, Africans have shaped images of self and other, with geographical distance as a main factor in creating these distinctions. These images acquired distinctly racial attributes, which in turn helped to create not just an 'other' but an 'inferior other'. Although both this racial imagination of sub-Saharan Africans and the ascribed inferiority predate the advent of Islam, it was the latter that helped shape the justifications of sub-Saharan inferiority in a religious language. Sub-Saharan Africans were seen in North Africa as infidels or heretics, who could legally be enslaved. As their culture was not seen in all respects to be Islamic, it was held to be inferior (just like European culture was held to be inferior until the eighteenth century at least). Saharan culture itself was and is generally seen as closer to North African culture than to sub-Saharan African culture, by all sides involved, although there are many reasons

46 B. Lecocq and P. Schrijver, 'The War on Terror in a haze of dust: potholes and pitfalls on the Saharan Front', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 25 (2007), 141–66; B. Lecocq, G. Mann, B. Whitehouse, B. Dida, L. Pelckmans, N. Belalimat, B. Hall, and W. Lacher, 'One hippopotamus and eight blind analysts: a multivocal analysis of the 2012 political crisis in the divided Republic of Mali', *Review of African Political Economy*, 137 (2013).

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to see this differently. These visions are to some extent still prevalent in Africa, as they are in Europe. Europeans largely built their knowledge of the Sahara and the lands beyond it on studies and travelogues from North Africa and the wider Muslim world, but from the nineteenth century onwards, these became complemented with first-hand experience – first of European explorers, then of European colonisers. These took over the civilisational bias of the North African Islamic world towards sub-Saharan Africa, topping it up with an extra layer of Eurocentrism.

The construction of European academic knowledge on North Africa, the Sahara and sub-Saharan Africa, and on the relations between these worlds, built on pre-existing knowledge, focusing on the differences between an Arab, a Saharan, and a Black Islam, which are all equally imaginary. These visions exaggerated the local premises in a strategy to divide and conquer that took shape in the *politique des races* in sub-Saharan Africa and the *politique berbère* in North Africa. European scholarship and politics strengthened local views of self and other as racially and culturally different, therewith widening the distance between the Saharan shores. With the recent upsurge of 'globalisation' in the Sahara in both economic and political ways, the interest in the region grew again in Europe as well as in North Africa, leading to the funding of new research in Europe and the creation of new study centres in North Africa. The scholarly community needs to be careful, though, in not letting policy–guided research agendas bury fundamental research under the sand.

In order to bridge the gap over the Sahara, we need more inclusive interdisciplinary scholarship, taking linguistics, archaeology, anthropology, and social geography more firmly aboard, while re-examining the local and deeper historicity of colonial tropes, carefully separating European constructions from the local notions that might undergird them. These should include still-prevalent ideas about Islam, race, and racism. However painful and politically incorrect this work might seem, it would greatly enhance our understanding of the connections and divisions over the Sahara. The civilisational bias leads us still in considering the history of connections across the Sahara to be one in which the north influences the south more than *vice versa* – yet current developments challenge that view and give us pause to reflect on why and how these connections may have been different in the past.

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